

Profile in Public Service: Shenandoah Mayor Garry Watts

By Rachael Pitts

TML Director of Member Services

Shenandoah Mayor Garry Watts is an example of the hundreds of hard-working, dedicated city officials serving small cities in Texas. We think it is important to profile these public servants from time to time.



Six years ago, when Garry Watts moved to Shenandoah—a city of more than 2,000 residents located in Montgomery County—he immediately knew he wanted to give back to the thriving community. With his can-do and enthusiastic attitude, he was soon appointed to the

Shenandoah City Council in 2005 to fill a vacancy and was later elected to the council in 2006. Garry then went on to be elected mayor in 2008 and was re-elected for a second term as mayor last year.

Originally from Kansas City, Missouri, Garry and his wife of 42 years, Helen, raised their three sons—Derik, Brian, and Craig—in Carmel, Indiana. Garry spent more than 30 years in the insurance and banking industry before retiring in 2002 as senior vice president of marketing for a major insurance company. When not busy out and about the city, Garry enjoys golfing and travelling.

What makes Shenandoah unique?

Shenandoah has a small city environment with big city amenities. When you think about it, we really have the best of both worlds. Our residents enjoy low ad valorem tax rates, with close community ties, and all in a safe, upscale setting with urban conveniences.

What are the city's most pressing issues?

Some of our most pressing issues include properly managing growth, delivery of water and sewer services, regional mobility, maintaining transparency, and keeping residents

informed about future planning. While our geographical limits are finite, the residential and commercial development continues in Shenandoah.

Shenandoah has been a city in transition for the last several years while development increased rapidly in a short period of time. Early on, there was some resistance to this dramatic change. We've worked to get buy-in from elected officials and local stakeholders that this transition is good for our city and our neighbors, as long as it's managed well. Shenandoah is in a very upscale area of the county, and I'm very mindful of keeping our city "distinctive yet seamless" to the communities around us.

What are your short-term goals for the city?

We work hard to maintain the highest residential quality of life, while still allowing for the commercial and retail growth that surrounds us. This effort is our continuing goal in the short term and in the long term.

The city just completed an Integrated Development Code, which took nearly three years to develop. This new code combines our zoning and subdivision ordinances and will guide us going forward for greater consistency and clarity.

What are your long-term goals for the city?

Shenandoah is in the middle of strategic planning to map out the next five to ten years, and each department is looking closely at long-term goals from a practical sense. We have some capital improvement projects in the pipeline for the next few years that we're excited about and which will enhance city services and streamline costs.

My long-term goals include further integrating a business philosophy into our culture. We're utilizing strategic planning tools that help us analyze our internal and external environment to determine our strengths and weaknesses. This process also takes into consideration various political, economic, social, technological, and regulatory factors, among others.

As we go through this exercise, we should keep the following questions in mind:

- What do we do?
- Whom do we serve?
- How do we excel?

If we can keep these priorities in the forefront of our thoughts going forward, we'll be successful.

The business climate in our city, county, and region changes constantly and quickly, so it's a challenge to have a hard copy of a five- or ten-year plan. I prefer a plan showing opportunities and having the flexibility to obtain goals and sustain growth, along with cost controls that give our residents the best place to live, work, and play. As elected officials, it's our responsibility to leave the city better for the next generation of leaders.

What are the city's greatest opportunities?

We're very fortunate to have great neighbors in the surrounding communities, and we are all on the same page with quality of life and responsible development as our main objectives. We also have the population density and strong per capita income levels to support our commercial areas, as well as some great amenities that attract visitors. Our prime location on Interstate 45 is a tremendous convenience for those who live here, as well as for businesses looking at expanding to the area, and for the steady stream of corporate and leisure travelers. Last but certainly not least, we have a committed city council and capable staff who work together toward common goals.

What are the city's greatest challenges?

Water and mobility are the greatest challenges that we face right now. Water supply is a statewide concern, especially in light of drought conditions in recent months. Delivery of water and sewer services is becoming more costly, and we're looking to regional partnerships to contain expenses and still provide services to our communities. As much as this presents a challenge, it also provides an opportunity to educate our residents and businesses about water conservation practices and other cooperative efforts, which are important under any circumstances.

Since we're in the suburban Houston area, public transit doesn't reach this far north. We have a great commuter system that operates out of several locations in The Woodlands, but no regular public transportation. This will become a bigger issue in the years ahead, as Montgomery County continues to grow and a larger labor force will need transportation. We've been lucky to have a number of

roadway improvements in the last few years to help alleviate traffic for general motorists.

What major projects is the city currently undertaking?

We are about half-way through a major, five-year infrastructure replacement project that will upgrade water, sewer, and storm drainage systems, as well as provide wider streets with curbs and gutters in the original residential section of Shenandoah. At this time, the progress is ahead of schedule, and we're very proud of the results so far. This project was featured in the May 2010 *Texas Town & City* magazine.

What organizations are you involved with?

Getting involved in the local community allows you to make a difference and learn more about the needs of those who live, work, and do business in your area. I'm a big believer in rolling up your sleeves and taking a hands-on, active role.

I currently serve on the boards of the South Montgomery County Woodlands Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Partnership, and on The Woodlands Advisory Board. I am also co-chairman of

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Small Cities' Corner

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the Boy Scouts of America - Tall Timbers District, vice chair for the Texas Municipal League Legislative Policy Committee on Utilities and Transportation, and member of the TML Resolutions Committee. I'm a board member of the Association of Mayors, Councilmembers and Commissioners, which is a TML affiliate, and I recently joined the board of the Montgomery County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Why do you attend the TML Annual Conference and Exhibition and other TML training events?

We attend the annual conference and training events to stay current on issues that affect municipal government and business operations in general. I have found the training and educational resources offered by TML to be exemplary. When I was first elected to the Shenandoah City Council, I began accumulating TML continuing education hours, and it was immensely helpful. I learned more than I ever imagined and soon garnered the CMO certification. Since then, it has been my privilege to serve on the TML Legislative Policy

Committee on Utilities and Transportation and the TML Resolutions Committees. I recently joined the Association of Mayors, Councilmembers and Commissioners. We make sure that all of our newly elected officials attend TML training and education courses. Our department heads also take advantage of the great training programs offered by TML.

What advice can you offer a newly elected city official?

The best advice to follow is to stay focused on your mission. Avoid bringing a personal agenda, vendettas, or other baggage to your role as an elected official. Secondly, jump into the training programs offered by TML, and also learn from your city manager and staff. Those are the people who have been in the trenches of city operations, and they are there to help you get more familiar with your new position. Get to know the department heads and ask questions. Always be open to learning, and stay grounded. ★

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